學術討論

Reflections on Theory, Gender and the Psyche in the Study of Chinese History

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There have been several comprehensive reviews of historiography on the history of Chinese women and gender both in this journal as well as elsewhere.[1] Among the more recent is a highly informative article written by Connie Orlinski, in which she outlines contemporary thematic trends in gender history, including the body, modernity and representation of gender, as well as state constructions of gender. She also mentions recent theoretical shifts that underlie these trends. Orlinski, however, is not concerned with discussing these theoretical shifts in any explicit manner. In contrast, in this inquiry here, I put the question of theory and feminist scholarship at the center. First, I discuss the state of theory in the West-based China field. In particular, I inquire into why some China historians still remain highly uncomfortable with

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1 See Ropp, 1991; Mann, 1993; Orlinski, 1995.

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postmodernism.[2] This discussion serves as context to the second section, in which I turn more specifically to feminist scholarship in the Chinese history field. There, I identify the theoretical concepts that have informed the shift from conventional history of women to gender history and suggest that gender historians have been much more willing to engage with postmodernist theory. I contend that they are thus in a good position to conceive of new directions for the field as a whole. Finally, I consider a current proposal in non-China gender studies to replace what many scholars see as an ossifying category of "gender" with a new construct, the "psyche," and assess whether this new concept has any relevance in China studies.

Postmodern Theory in the West-based Chinese History Field

Post-structuralism has been dominant in the humanities and social sciences of the Western academy for long over a decade. Theorists of the movement have turned to questions of language to deconstruct essentialist categories and universalistic assumptions behind the facade of "objective" knowledge.[3] Philosophical in nature, these recent theories challenge primary

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2 "Postmodernism" is a difficult term to define precisely. Originally describing new developments in the arts and in architectural studies, postmodernism has since expanded to describe trends in philosophy and culture at large. Generally speaking, it characterizes a change in *zeitgeist* from the universalizing tendencies of modernity to a focus on multivalent meanings and the instability of language. For sake of convenience and to be in accord with scholars I discuss in the paper, I will use postmodernism to describe the body of theory more precisely known as post-structuralism as well as associated intellectual movements such as post-colonialism and new cultural studies.

3 Post-structuralism is both indebted to as well as critical of the work of structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss. It follows structuralism in its attempt to introduce culture into the question of the constitution of human consciousness, but challenges its search for deep structures of meaning and metaphysical patterns of thought. Foucault, perhaps the most influential post-structuralist theorist among historians, introduces the role of language and

legacies of the Enlightenment including the notion of an objective Self and the ultimate goal of progress through the ability to know rationally. Taken together, they have placed prevailing epistemological practices, including historical knowing, under scrutiny and sought to disabuse previous modernist pretenses to absolute objectivity. Whereas historians of Europe and America have long been articulating responses to postmodernism, Western China scholars have been far slower in addressing the issue. Lately, however, there has been an outpouring of not just discussion and debate about the topic, but also emotion in the field of Chinese history.

The arrival of the journal *positions* in the early 1990s most obviously signaled the beginning of a presence of postmodern theory in the West-based Chinese history field. The journal's endorsement of new theories has been clear from the start. Editor Tani Barlow has been among the most vocal proponents, appealing in her inaugural issue article for the need among historians to heed postmodernist concerns with epistemology and to pay more attention to their own narrative techniques and the power of representation in the writing of history.[4] In addition to *positions,* the growing presence of postmodernism in the China field is evinced by the increasing numbers of history informed by new theoretical sensibilities as well as the more explicit

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discourse in the production of power. Derrida has ushered in a method of deconstructive analysis that undermines objective knowledge at its most microscopic levels by revealing the instability of language, signs and meaning. Post-colonial scholars have followed suit by revealing the colonial implications of knowledge, linking academic inquiries of the non-West to political and military colonialism.

4 In her article for the inaugural issue of the journal, she writes about the colonizing implications of Western historiography on China. While she shows that social historians have in the past sought to identify the "imperialism" of "western impact" narratives on modern Chinese history, she also suggests that the simple evidentiary proofs used by this earlier generation are not enough and urges all historians to consider how their own production of knowledge might also be complicit in replicating colonial power relations. See Barlow, 1993.

methodological discussions in journal articles, monographs and papers at conferences. That being said, postmodernism's reception has been far from universally welcomed and still continues to be rocky.

To be sure, one can easily feel alienated from postmodernist thought and how it has been introduced into the China field. To begin with, Jacques Derrida, among others, have identified how language itself is political and can constrain as well as constitute the act of knowing. Others including Hayden White have emphasized how conventional history-writing in particular employs universalizing linguistic devices such as analytical categories that are deeply-entrenched in epistemological binaries and teleological narratives.[5] These serious theoretical considerations have, however, spawned particular linguistic and rhetorical techniques that risk coming off as unnecessarily obfuscating and dense. Some even charge that the playful irreverence and sense of irony used by postmodern theorists amount to a lack of respect for knowledge and betray a lack of serious commitment to the subject studied. Second, much of the theory uses hyperbole to force points home. For example, thinkers such as Foucault make highly controversial claims about the ubiquity of discourse and the conflicting nature of power.[6] Even though one can argue that the controversy of these claims functions to shock and thus force us to rethink how knowledge has the power to constitute social and political conditions, hyperbole often fails to withstand critical scrutiny. Finally, much of the frenzied pitch of the debate may have stemmed from the conviction and zeal of younger proponents eager to introduce new theories to the discipline.

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5 For a discussion and example of the linguistic attempt to subvert conventional narrative writing in history, see Harry Harootunian's introduction to *Things Seen and Unseen* (Harootunian, 1988). See Charlotte Beahan's review of recent gender studies for complaints about the abstruse language of post-structuralism in Chinese studies (Beahan, 1997).

6 See for example, volume one of *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978).

Fighting from an underdog position, the strategy has often been to differentiate themselves from pre-existing and dominant approaches to scholarship.

Having said that, it cannot be denied that recent theories have levied a profound critique of Western social science epistemology that West-based Chinese historians, participants of that epistemology, cannot afford to ignore. But, rebuttals to postmodernism in the China field have so far failed to rise effectively to the challenge.

The challenge has particularly elicited a palpable sense of discomfort among a cohort of social historians. In May 1997, a conference on the uses of theory in modern Chinese history was convened at UCLA where several attempts were made to confront the postmodernism. The May 1998 issue of *Modern China* included the revised papers of the original conference along with an additional contribution by Alexander Woodside. The conference and recent journal issue are significant on many counts.[7] First, the journal has traditionally been oriented towards social history primarily informed by social science theory. Thus, having an entire issue dedicated to theory and modern Chinese history in which several contributors were concerned with new theoretical trends suggests that postmodernism within the China field can no longer simply be ignored. Second, conference participants and journal contributors were divided between those wary of recent theoretical trends and those more willing to engage. Consequently, the debate over the place of postmodernism in the practice of Chinese history in the West was lively and even emotionally charged. Two sides of the debate were brought into sharp relief.

Much of the controversy at this conference stemmed from a critique levied at James Hevia's *Cherishing Men From Afar,* a book about the 1793

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[7] "Uses of Theory in Modern Chinese History Research" held on May 10, 1997. See the introduction to the *Modern China* issue where Philip Huang lays out the editorial agenda (Huang 1998).

Macartney mission during the Qing dynasty. Several conference participants were upset not only with the book's clear post-structuralist sensibilities, but also with the field's endorsement of this new approach (the book had been granted the Joseph Levenson prize on pre-modern historical scholarship). The debate surrounding Hevia's book has continued in print in the pages of *Modern China* and Hong Kong's *Ershi yi shiji* [Twenty-first Century].[8] At the conference itself, the attack on Hevia prompted several of the scholars present to take exception with the tenor of the critique. It was noted that the criticisms of Hevia seemed driven more out of emotion rather than well-reasoned intellectual opposition.[9] James Hevia himself writes in a recent response, "regardless of how one frames the challenges of postmodernism, they ought to be met courageously with something other than dismissiveness or hostile epithets (Hevia 1998: 321)."

This particular controversy and the emotionalism surrounding it is noteworthy, if only because it reflects passions that characterize the larger debate concerning postmodernism in the field. At one level, the intensity of the discussion appears to be rooted in institutionalized affiliations and divisions within the field. The landscape of the West-based Chinese history field is under contention and the right to define or, in some cases, blur the boundaries between history and postmodernist thought is being fought for. The scholars most interested in keeping postmodernism at bay are social historians who years ago led fundamental changes in the field away from the scholarship of sinologists and "China Watchers."[10] It is their arsenal of intellectual

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8 See *Modern China* 1998, vol. 24, no. 2 and no. 3. Also, see Elman and Huters, 1997.

9 As the discussant of the May 10, 1997 Conference, European scholar Perry Anderson pointed to the various rhetorical flourishes used in critical papers, making apparent the ad-hominem nature of the attacks. Other scholars in attendance raised objection to the tendency to polarize the relationship between history and postmodernism and obscure the complex process of translation that Hevia is trying to address.

10 In the early 1970s, issues of the *Bulletin of Concerned Scholars* ran politically engaged

weaponry, including notions of "social reality" and "empirical fact," that postmodernism has recently placed under unflattering lights of interrogation.

With the epistemological source of their intellectual identity under siege, historians of an earlier generation have responded in various ways. Some, driven by a sense of fear or dread, dismiss postmodernism out of hand. Others simply dig their heels further into the trenches of "objectivism." A few seek to domesticate postmodernist thought and make a gesture towards limited engagement with recent theories (as opposed to immediate dismissal). In the end, however, they too refuse to rethink the fundamental premises of conventional history. They cling to an unswerving faith in "empirical fact" and contend that postmodernism is better left outside of the field because of its tendency to deteriorate into extreme subjectivism after a reasonable inquiry into objectivist practices.

Unfortunately, critics have not always adequately sought to understand the full history behind postmodernism. Their critique thus risks gross oversimplification of the highly complex, if at times frustrating intellectual movement. The goal of postmodernist thought has been to reflect upon how language informs our ability to perceive and know objectively, a goal which needs to be placed into the larger more fundamental reconsideration of the subject-object relationship. This rethinking is also the context within which conventional historical practice and its aim to reconstruct the past objectively have come under fierce attack. While critics have warned against the

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critique of the implicit imperialism behind Fairbank's "Western impact" narrative. These made evident that the production of knowledge by China watchers was embroiled in domestic US politics during the Cold War. *Modern China* was established in much the same spirit, helping to recast the field towards the direction of social history and challenge a politically-oriented historical approach that had dominated the field up until then. There have been several historiographic and state of the field discussions of this generation's invaluable scholarship as well as the limitations of their approach in light of recent theoretical trends. See Barlow, 1993a and Dirlik, 1996.

intellectual anarchy of postmodernism and its jettisoning of demonstrable fact, the reality has been quite the contrary. Much of postmodernist thought has been obsessed with "fact" (that being textual evidence). With an eye on the historically-specific nature of epistemology within which all historical actors are embedded, the new theories demand closer attention to how "facts" are rendered meaningful. They encourage an increased sensitivity to understanding how texts are read both by the producers and consumers in their historical place and time as well as by present-day scholars.

Critical engagement then requires an intellectual approach that takes the movement seriously. Once one considers the movement on its own terms, the untenable nature of prevailing critiques of postmodernist thought in the West-based China field becomes readily apparent. Take, for example, what may be the most popular reproach of postmodernism. Critics gravely warn that this linguistic turn is "only about discourse" or simply results in a reduction of fact to representation, which in turn results in an abandonment of facts, archival work, and footnoting. The specter raised is that intellectual anarchy and extreme subjectivism will reign. However, this argument is premised upon an overdrawn dichotomy between fact and representation, objectivity and extreme subjectivity – the kind of binary that Derridean deconstruction has so effectively used to undermine Western epistemology. The dichotomoy implies problematically that the only alternative to objective, empirical knowledge is to not know at all. But, in actuality, there is a huge gray area between the two poles and critical re-examination of the production of knowledge does not automatically degenerate into subjective chaos.

Thus, historians stand to benefit from such epistemological inquiries whereas a defensive resistance only forecloses any possibility of gaining subtle insights into the writing of Chinese history. In the remaining part of this article, I suggest that gender historians have reaped methodological benefit through a critical engagement with new theories. In fact, displaying a far more generous

attitude and firmer grasp of postmodernist thought, feminist scholars are among those who are best equipped to reshape the landscape of the Chinese history field at large.[11]

Gender and Theory in Chinese History

Historians of gender were noticeably absent at the original May 1997 UCLA conference. Nor have any partaken in the exchange that has henceforth ensued.[12] Had they participated, however, they would have had much to add. Unlike their counterparts in the field at large, feminist scholars have refrained from bitter and emotional debates over postmodernism. Traditionally located

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11 Gender scholars are of course not the only group to conduct an on-going dialogue with new theories. The engagement by post-Needham historians of science is also noteworthy. Moreover, there are several individual scholars who are highly proficient with recent theories. Take for example, Prasenjit Duara. His article for the above-mentioned *Modern China* issue, "Why is History Antitheoretical," is a thoughtful examination of the link between Nation and History that has been at the crux of why history as a discipline has been anti-theoretical. It provokes a rethinking of the national paradigm behind history-writing as well as behind related issues of causality and periodization (Duara, 1998). Moreover, this recent postmodern turn has prompted scholars who would not necessarily characterize their work as "postmodern" to reflect upon historical epistemology. Frederic Wakeman's "Telling Chinese History," is an eloquent exposition of narrative theories (many of which predated postmodern theories) as well as a deliberation of the use of narratives in history writing. In this piece, he exhorts historians to consider their narrative choices with care and to strive for telling good stories without sacrificing historical accuracy (Wakeman, 1998). Wakeman's inquiry demonstrates, perhaps inadvertently, that the postmodern examination of historical narrative is hardly "radical" or "extreme" and continues an interrogation that has started long before. Alexander Woodside's contribution in the volume, while critical (and not without reason) of the provincial and Eurocentric nature of postmodernist epistemological anxieties, also lives up to, if not intentionally, to the postmodern ethos of critical self-reflection (Woodside, 1998).

12 Gail Hershatter was originally invited to be a panelist, but did not attend. Unfortunately, there was no replacement and without a scholar of gender, an opportunity to bring in gender theory was missed.

at the margins of the field, they have had perhaps less at stake and less to fear from recent methodological reflections.

The willingness on the part of feminist scholars to engage with postmodernism finds testimony in the recent shift from women's history to gender. This shift is not simply a fashionable change in appellation, but rather represents a larger change in methodological and theoretical orientation. Whereas a conventional women's history approach does not reflect critically upon the constructed nature of womanhood, gender history has been far more sensitive to the issue. While never negligent of debts incurred to the scholastic as well as political accomplishments of pioneering work on women, scholars of gender have taken the cue from postmodernist feminist theory to unravel some of the problematic premises underlying their central queries.

Women's history in Western academia was born out of the heady era of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, a time when the feminist movement, with all its promise for political change and social opportunity, took place. It is thus no accident that the first generation of historians of women chose topics such as female liberation, women in politics, and women in revolution to research.[13] A second wave of feminist scholarship shifted the analysis from inquiries into women in politics to histories of the social lives of women. As part of a larger social history trend that grew to prominence during the 1970s into the 1980s, this second generation examined the social choices and conditions within which women negotiated family and marriage, kinship structures, patriarchy and property, labor and work. It is undeniable that both generations engaged in

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13 See Young, 1973; Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983; and Ono, 1988. This is not to say that the topics of female liberation and women in revolution are not legitimate for twentieth-century Chinese history. In fact, late Qing reformers and May Fourth intellectuals placed the issue of female liberation onto the tables of modern Chinese history. Indeed, the topic continues to fascinate scholars of gender today. See Christina Gilmartin's work, which carefully historicizes Chinese feminism and avoids the Eurocentric assumptions of past narratives on liberation (Gilmartin, 1995).

Herculean efforts simply to bring women into the arena of Chinese history and have successfully built the field of Chinese women's history into what it is today.

Despite the great contributions made by these previous waves of scholarship, the passions driving these early efforts have generated a serious methodological predicament. The presumed essentialism of female subjectivity behind early American and European feminism has led historians of women to impose their own Western and modern concerns, priorities, and political agendas onto Chinese history. This tendency is most evident in the narratives of female oppression and liberation frequently used in histories of Chinese women. For example, first generation feminist scholars often took as their point of analytical departure the question of whether "true" female liberation was attained in the May Fourth period or under the CCP. Some bemoaned that female liberation was suspended or never fully realized because women's rights were placed second to the national and/or socialist revolution. Others identified the persistence of a patrilocal family system into the PRC as evidence of the failure.[14] The second generation frequently started from an assumed point of female inequality and oppression. While justifying a contemporary commitment to female liberation, this approach did not necessarily lead to precise history.

Rubie Watson and Patricia Ebrey's edited volume, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, is a prime example of scholarship that assumes inequality (Watson and Ebrey, 1991). Contributors of the volume have retrieved what appears to be an inordinate amount of evidence to suggest that patrilocality, patrilineality and patriarchy persisted throughout imperial China into the twentieth-century. They argue that throughout Chinese history, patrilocality has made it difficult for new brides to enter into an imposing and

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14 See Johnson, 1983 and Stacey, 1983 for studies of patrilocality in the PRC period.

foreign new household and that patrilineal inheritance and the marriage system failed to provide much for daughters. From these findings, Watson concludes that tremendous legal, social, economic and cultural restrictions were imposed on Chinese women in the past.

To be sure, Chinese history is filled with phenomena that appear highly perplexing from a modern perspective. Social practices such as footbinding, seclusion, and widow chastity, which deeply impacted the lives and literally molded the bodies and minds of late imperial elite women, are difficult to fathom let alone explain from a contemporary perspective. Historians of women have resorted variously to forces of the kinship system and marriage market, the power of ideology or the sway of fashion to explain these customs. Ultimately, however, these explanations are weak. What underlies them are modern sensibilities which take a "natural" body for granted and assume freedom for women within both the public and private sphere. They presume moreover that social and ideological structures and practices such as patrilocality, Neo-Confucianism, and bound feet are *a priori* oppressive and that women in the past would suffer from a patrilineal descent system or experience bodily practices in much the same way contemporary women would. Yet, these premises have never really been proven. Moreover, these explanations fail to account convincingly for how women not only survived the economic, political, social and ideological structures of patriarchy, but also often negotiated and manipulated such a system to their own advantage.

Much to their credit, it has been leading social historians of Chinese women who have started to plumb recent theoretical interventions to reveal prevailing dangers in the field to distort the past with contemporary concerns. Dorothy Ko, for example, discusses how early feminist scholars have frequently been trapped in the May Fourth narrative that rendered "traditional women" as victims. By fleshing out a "woman's culture" in the late Ming that is socially complex, politically-charged, and emotionally-rich, Ko has now cast

doubt upon the evidence of victimization that once appeared incontrovertible (Ko, 1994).

On a more theoretical level, what lies at the crux of women's history (and its tendency to read contemporary agendas back in time) is an implicit assumption of universal female subjectivity. In contrast, gender history underscores that knowledge about gender and the body is not only subject to myriad interpretations over time, but also integrally linked to if not constitutive of meaning ascribed to the material, political and social conditions of the time. As discussed earlier, post-structuralism has demonstrated that even the most common sense terms and concepts are culturally constructed and historically specific. Terms such as "individual," "human rights", "woman" and "female liberation," might seem self-evident to a modern scholar, but as Derrida has shown, these ostensibly neutral terms are far from impartial and trigger the cognitive association of their binary opposites. In like manner, post-colonial theorists have shown how such terms activate a full set or narrative of associations that have more often than not been derived from and formulated within the historical experience of the modern West.[15] It is in this theoretical

15 Starting in the 1980s, post-structuralist feminism prompted Europeanists to historicize the feminist movement in the West. Scholars turned back to the French Revolution, the genesis of modern liberatory politics, to investigate how notions of individual liberation and human rights along with gender and sexuality were not only politically and linguistically-constructed, but in fact mutually defining. Carole Pateman, for example, cogently argues how female liberation in the West has been predicated upon the Revolution's historically specific discourse on individualism as well as its socio-political order of opposed domestic and public spheres. She contends that "universal" male suffrage and democracy rested upon a "sexual contract" whereby the individual public man had behind him a Republican wife relegated to the domestic sphere. This relegation of women into the domestic sphere, she argues, was a necessary prerequisite for future political movements of the West that strove to secure individual rights and suffrage for women (Pateman, 1988). Other scholarship in this vein includes Joan Landes' work on public aristocratic women in court politics during the Old Regime prior to the French Revolution. Landes shows how sexual difference was not nearly as sharply demarcated prior to the establishment of the Republic.

context that postmodernist feminism has stripped concepts such as womanhood, sexuality and the corporeal body of essentialist assumptions and unitary meaning.[16]

There have been critiques of the influence of postmodernism on feminist scholarship. Detractors charge, for example, that gender fundamentally endangers the original political impulse behind feminist scholarship by jeopardizing the concern for "real" women and the study of their social lives.[17] This assertion rests upon the complaint that the linguistic turn is essentially "post-social" in nature and echoes criticisms of postmodernism in the China field at large.[18] Once again, however, these responses reveal more about the implicit materialism dictating conventional social history (which assumes that material reality and economic structures of society primarily determine agency) than levy a successful critique. Even though post-structuralism has placed

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She argues that male Revolutionaries, threatened by aristocratic women who educated male newcomers about court politics, repudiated female publicness and targeted public women as an "effeminizing force" in politics. It was then that the domestic sphere and Republican Womanhood was established and effectively silenced public women (Landes, 1988). In a recent historiographical article, Joan Scott succinctly summarizes the findings of these works. In addition to deconstructing individualism and liberation, states Scott, these histories show that "sexual difference [in the modern West] was...the effect, not the cause of women's exclusion [from citizenship]" (Scott, 1998: 14).

16 See Scott, 1988 and Judith Butler, 1990. Recent accomplishments in the history of science field (in which scholars are demonstrating that universalistic claims of scientific knowledge cannot be extracted from the historically-specific contexts of politics and epistemology within which they are produced) have complimented postmodernist feminist thought, also prompting scholars to place the "body" under scrutiny.

17 Critics have posited the question, if "woman" is a constructed linguistic category, unstable throughout time and place, where does that leave the possibility of politics, the driving force of Euro-American feminism in the academic world as well as in society at large? Post-structuralist feminists have responded by pointing out that the critique itself is premised on the unproven assumption that politics is contingent upon a fixed and naturalized identity. See Butler, 1992.

18 See Woodside, 1998.

absolute, fixed materiality under doubt, the turn to language hardly sacrifices a concern for social relations and material culture. Rather, it adds a crucial constitutive layer to the analysis by insisting that meaning is historically ascribed to the social, the material as well as the corporeal.

Gender histories in the China field prove that the "linguistic turn" is not tantamount to the neglect of either women or the social. Armed with postmodernist insights into the importance of examining how the social and material were historically perceived, scholars continue to investigate the social lives and corporeal experiences of women. Charlotte Furth's excellent work on gender, body and medicine illustrates this point. [19] Furth has combined the interests and strengths of gender history with another field that has recently flourished under the influence of postmodern theory, the history of science. In several conference papers and published articles, she has implicitly deconstructed Western assumptions about corporeality by explicitly demonstrating an alternative tradition of knowledge on the body (which, itself, alters over time and place) in imperial China. She reconstructs ideas about the body and female sexuality in the imperial period, linking them to prevailing notions of the cosmological and political world order. She also demonstrates how sexuality was not based on a foundational discourse of biological essentialism that sets male and female in binary opposition, but was configured through the dynamics of *yin* and *yang*.[20] Most importantly, Furth is not solely concerned with discursive renditions of the body and sexuality, but also inquires into how definitions of gender, body and medicine mediated clinical practices of healing as well as social interactions between female patients, family and household members, male physicians and female healers.[21]

19 The postmodern challenge to sexuality and the corporeal body has spawned a cottage industry of histories on sexuality and the body in Western academia in general.

20 See Furth 1988. Also see Zito, 1997: 212-213.

21 She has presented these ideas and parts of her forthcoming book, *A Flourishing* Yin:

Another reason that above criticisms about gender are misguided is that human agency features centrally in gender studies. Far from losing sight of "women," or "men" for that matter, the history of gender is obsessed with identifying local knowledge of gender relations within which agency was determined. Gender scholars are concerned about how discourse on gender informed the making of choices, the articulation of desires, and the negotiation of material conditions. In the China field, Ko's 1994 study is among the first to lift out "agency" as an analytical concern and has played a crucial role in steering the field to the broader approach of the cultural history of gender. Suspicious of earlier approaches that employed writings about women by men (e.g., prescriptive texts) as transparent reflections of lived reality, Ko retrieves writings by elite gentry women and courtesans of the seventeenth-century and focuses on reconstructing the cultural and social conditions within which these women educated themselves, exhibited their talents and lived their lives. In particular, she identifies a "woman's culture," which was based in the inner, domestic domain, but was integrally linked with the outside world of commerce and publishing in late Ming Jiangnan.

Ko's study has been critiqued. Her valorization of female self-empowerment and an autonomous "women's culture" in particular has elicited charges that she provides an overly sanguine depiction of female agency and of the lives of elite women. While acknowledging the theoretical ambition and historical findings of Ko's book, Susan Mann, for example, has suggested that Ko's celebration of an autonomous and empowering "women's culture" smacks of Western feminist parochialism.[22] Indeed, a cross-class analysis

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Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665 at several workshops and conferences, including "The Case History in Chinese Medicine: History, Science, and Narrative," organized by Furth and Francesca Bray, sponsored by UCLA's Center for Chinese Studies and held on Jan 24, 1998.

22 See Mann, 1997.

beyond the gentry women-courtesan circles or a longer historical context that takes changes for women from the Song into consideration may temper Ko's highly optimistic analysis. Nevertheless, Ko's work is a milestone in the field. It incorporates insights from gender theory and focuses on historicized instances of women appropriating gender norms and ideas for their own purposes (even if she arguably reifies that agency). Subsequent scholarship has continued to identify historical conditions for female agency of at least a small group of elite gentry and courtesan women. Literary historians, for example, have done a great deal of work on the discourses surrounding the late Ming ideal of the courtesan, arguing that the courtesan ideal was not merely an object of exploitation or veneration by self-fashioning elite literati, but also an identity to be appropriated by elite courtesans (e.g, Liu Rushi) actively seeking opportunity to become key players in the cultural and political world of the late Ming.[23]

This shift to gender and a concern for female agency has furthermore been contingent upon a fundamental re-conceptualization of power in postmodernist thought. Michel Foucault is perhaps the most influential theorist on this count. He has explored, if somewhat paradoxically, the interrelationship between knowledge and power (to the point of controversially conflating the two completely) and has inquired into how discursive power can be repressive or prohibitive in one arena yet empowering or liberating in another. This reevaluation of power is in striking contrast to the assumptions of power behind conventional social histories of women. Whereas earlier feminist scholarship in the China field tended to identify larger structural forces of society, thought, and economy as the fundamental source of power, the postmodernist gender approach asserts that shifting systems of knowledge and

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23 See Widmer and Chang, 1997. For an examination of a courtesan making use of this ideal to her personal as well as political advantage, see Li's article in *Writing Women* (Li, 1997).

discourse crucially constitute power relations and thus, make power far more fluid in nature.

Gail Hershatter's work on prostitutes in the twentieth-century attempts to grapple with these complex ideas of power.[24] In contrast to late imperial scholars such as Ko who study elite writing women, Hershatter studies a class of women who did not record their thoughts as prolifically. Nor were these women necessarily in privileged positions that would allow them to subvert larger structures of powers easily, making approaches that emphasize "appropriation" more difficult to employ. Thus, in her introduction, Hershatter faces two methodological challenges. First, she ruminates over the difficulties for the historian posed by the scarcity of sources and considers the usefulness of the post-colonial category of "subalternity" in thinking about the methodological limits of retrieving the prostitute's own voice. Second, she asks how "subalternity" can serve as an analytical category to help conceptualize workings of power for less-privileged women such as prostitutes.

In her attempt to answer the methodological conundrum of whether the history of the subaltern prostitute can even be written, Hershatter considers assertions by post-colonial feminist Gayatri Spivak that warn against West-based intellectuals unwittingly colonizing the subaltern when they attempt to "speak" on behalf of them. Hershatter clearly takes the post-colonial caution to heart and acknowledges that contemporary lenses can serve to obscure the pure transmission of past voices. She warns, for example, against a romanticization of resistance or a reification of agency, a recent tendency resulting from a contemporary desire to overcompensate for earlier social histories that assumed

24 She traces changing constructions of the "prostitute" from the late Qing to the beginning of the PRC. Whereas in the early twentieth-century, the prostitute was portrayed in nostalgic hues as a pleasure-seeking courtesan, by the 1930s and 1940s, the image had shifted to the "pheasant" streetwalker who was perceived as either a victim to be saved or a symbol of urban decay to be exterminated (Hershatter 1997).

more monolithic narratives of power.

In the end, however, Hershatter refuses to adopt Spivak's extreme stance that the subaltern can never speak and remains committed to writing a history of the Chinese prostitute. To do so, she realizes that she needs to reconfigure notions of power and agency. She thus proposes a view of "nested subalterns," a schema, if I understand correctly, that can help illuminate how prostitutes were subaltern only relationally (i.e., the concept of the subaltern thus changes from an 'essential' category to one that is redefined within each particular relationship). Through her historical research, Hershatter then identifies the various discourses on prostitution that mediated these relationships of power. In addition to the recovery of the history of the subaltern, Hershatter's study of gender thus seeks to conceptualize power and agency in more complex and sophisticated ways and thus, serves as an antidote to previous scholarship using assumptions of power that have proven to be too crude and imprecise.

Finally, another key attribute that gender historians are now acquiring is the postmodernist sensitivity to text. The deconstruction of a stable subject has led to a decentering of neutral authorial intent. Thus, postmodernism counsels against treating historical texts as transparent reflections of lived reality. It also rejects the possibility of locating an "authentic" voice – female or male – in sources. That being said, historians informed by post-structuralism do not simply throw up their hands in methodological despair, but rather seek to identify the politics behind textual production, as well as textual consumption (i.e., the interests dictating how a text is written or read – this includes the historian's own reception of the text). Feminist historians strive to identify the social background and gender of the writer as well as the social context of authorial production in general before determining how the information in the historical sources can be used. There has been an increased awareness, for example, that male writers of prescriptive texts would have very different

interests from female writers of literature and poetry and thus create different depictions of female propriety and footbinding.[25] With these methodological rigor upheld, it becomes easier to tease out interests and motivations of parties involved.

Taken together, the insights of the approach of gender has prompted a recasting of the analysis of several vexing topics in Chinese history. Take for example, the imperial cult of chastity, a state-endorsed system of accolades and awards for chaste women which began in the Tang and heightened in the Ming and Qing. Past scholarship on the topic ably traces the development of the cult over time, but appears to be at a loss in terms of identifying the historical significance of the institution.[26] At best, it has been implied that the institution served as a means for the state to maintain control over elite families, if at the expense of exploiting women. More recent examinations, however, have taken a rather different route. Scholars now realize that the abundant literature and rich discourse about female virtue are hardly "authentic" depictions of women in the imperial period. Nor do they simply reduce the system to a mechanism through which the state upholds its power and gender inequality. Rather, they seek first to identify the historically-specific cultural and epistemological assumptions that linked gender and sexuality with politics and then try to ascertain how the cult was meaningful to parties involved.

Katherine Carlitz' work on the *Biographies of Virtuous Women*, for example, persuasively argues that there was official interest in chaste women because the female body was seen to embody the virtue of the late imperial state and society at large. Recent work by Matthew Sommer shows similar

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25 See Mann 1997 which compares Ko's sensitivity to textual politics and Ebrey's inattention. See Furth's editorial introduction to a special issue on Women's Culture in *Late Imperial China* (Furth, 1992).

26 See Elvin, 1984.

dynamics functioning within the late imperial legal code.[27] He demonstrates how the legal system sought not only to protect chaste women (particularly chaste widows) but also functioned to sanction the virtue proactively since female virtue was a metaphor for a larger ideal of loyalty to the patriarch writ large, the emperor. Both then convincingly demonstrate state interests in maintaining the cult. Other historians are also trying to discern the motivations of women vis-à-vis official endorsement of female virtue and sexuality. Janet Theiss' work on High Qing law, for example, investigates how women and their families negotiated moral frameworks of female virtue and illicit sexuality in the legal system.[28] Most interesting is Theiss' identification of different interests on the part of women and their families that dictate their respective proceedings in the legal as well as social arena.

My own work-in-progress examines the continued significance of female virtue in the modern era. A study of a mid-1930s media sensation and legal trial, it too is dedicated to identifying how notions of female virtue both mediated political discussions and relations as well as constituted subjectivity of real women. In 1935, female assassin Shi Jianqiao killed warlord Sun Chuanfang to avenge her father's death. Her actions elicited wide public sympathy as well as scathing elite scorn. The complicated trial was appealed to the supreme court and received tremendous publicity. Not only were elite men (journalists, GMD pundits, legal experts, playwrights, etc.) commenting prolifically on the various implications of this woman's filial piety (*xiao*) and vigilante actions (*xia*), but the mass public avidly consumed the case in its myriad media depictions. By looking at the interrelationship among these sets of discourses surrounding the case, I strive to ascertain how female virtues of *xia* and *xiao* were defined, why the right to establish these definitions were

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27 See Sommer, 1996.

28 Theiss presented her work-in-progress at the Association for Asian Studies in Chicago in March, 1997.

sought, and how the authority to categorize, claim, and name the significance of the case was political. The case also allows me to showcase the choices of a single, albeit exceptional, woman. From her actions and writings, I hope to show that Shi was able to take full advantage of the unintended consequences that arose from her act of revenge in the name of her father. She was able to capitalize the widespread public support her embodiment of filial piety elicited to obtain judicial leniency and eventual state-sanction (in the form of a public pardon).

These recent studies on female virtue allow us to recast one of the original queries of women's history and help us better understand the unique historical conditions that made the question of female liberation significant in early twentieth-century China. Scholars now place the issue of liberation within the longer historical context of the chastity cult. Female liberation, education and political participation were modern virtues contested over during the late Qing and May Fourth periods because they were perceived to articulate larger political (i.e., nation) ideals in much the same way that chastity and filial piety were metaphors for political loyalty to the imperial state.[29] Historians of the twentieth-century moreover have rightly taken China's semi-colonial condition into consideration, differentiating the modern phenomenon from the imperial cult. Building on the work of post-colonial thinker Partha Chaterjee who has observed how colonial representations of India had at its foundation a misrepresentation of "traditional" Indian women, China scholars suggest that imperialists similarly misidentified a "traditional" foot-bound woman as the embodiment of China's backwardness. They further add that Chinese

29 These particular virtues were still iconoclastic, befitting of the period. By advocating modern womanhood premised upon "liberation," May Fourth thinkers and writers could not only claim to free women from the shackles of feudal virtues including filial piety and chastity but also strike at the gendered foundation of political commitment and the ethical order of the imperial past.

nationalists found this misidentification compelling, internalized it, and used it in their own formulations of national strength. Indeed, Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and Mao Zedong and other key intellectuals and political leaders felt that the start of modernizing the nation was modernizing its women.[30] In short, this approach of gender is a far cry from previous Eurocentric attempts to search for "true" liberation and signals an increasing awareness that the use of a contemporary barometer of womanhood to measure the past only results in obscuring historical agency.

Future Directions: Gender, Psyche and *li* ?

Whereas gender continues to be highly productive and beneficial for China scholars, Europeanists have recently started to reveal reservations of gender as an analytical concept. At a recent talk at UCLA, Scott presented a paper entitled, "Some Reflections on Gender and Politics," in which she drastically revises the approach on gender that she laid out ten years ago.[31] Scott does this because "gender," she argues, has become so widely used and abused that it has lost its critical and analytical edge. In her paper for the talk, Scott writes, "No matter how insistently feminist theorists have refined the term "gender" (purging it of all "natural" connotations while promoting its status as a "social construction"), they have been unable to prevent its corruption. ... And, judging from the number of scholarly books and articles

30 See, for example, Fitzgerald, 1997. Christina Gilmartin brings the specific politics of the period into consideration. She argues persuasively that presumptions of the relationship between female and national liberation played a crucial role in the political culture of the early CCP and broader national politics in the 1920s including the first United Front agreement between the CCP and the GMD (Gilmartin 1995).

31 The talk took place on February 12, 1998 as part of UCLA history department's European Colloquium series. For Scott's earlier work on gender see Scott, 1988.

that take gender and women to be synonymous, academics are not much better than the general public at maintaining the distinction between the physical and the social (nature and culture, body and mind) that the introduction of "gender" was meant to achieve." (Scott 1998: 2). Scott then suggests that there is the need to replace "gender" as well as "sex" (to which gender is often reduced despite repeated warnings and admonitions on the part of feminist theorists) with a notion of sexual difference. "Both sex and gender are expressions of certain beliefs about sexual difference; they are organizations of perception rather than transparent descriptions or reflections of nature." (Scott 1998: 4). She turns to the domain of psychoanalysis to theorize sexual difference as a social construction rather than a reflection of an essential quality.[32]

Scott's turn away from "gender" to the "psyche" is emblematic of a larger trend among Europeanists (though scholars differ in their characterization of this shift, which I discuss below). Indeed, the "psyche" is seen as a promising new category in its capacity to resolve the philosophical conundrum posed by the postmodernist turn towards the linguistic. If subjectivity is a social construction and formed through systems of discourse, how were these constructions internalized to the point of dictating lived reality, bodily practice and sexual behavior? Psychoanalysis promises to provide a theoretical model that will allow us to unravel this complex and enigmatic relationship between individual subject and social discourse, private convictions and public ideology.

Only a century ago, Freud articulated a theory that attempted to theorize the relationship among body, culture and subjectivity. His notion of the psyche referred to cognitive functions outside of rational awareness that influenced and determined individual behavior. At the deepest level of the psyche were thought to be the most basic sexual and aggressive impulses

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32 The use of Freud and especially Lacan is not new in feminist literary theory. See for example the scholarship of feminist film theorist, Kaja Silverman (Silverman 1992). But the incorporation of the unconscious in history is fairly unprecedented.

which could be uncovered by interpreting dreams, slips of the tongue, and neurotic symptoms. Freud also posited that these individual psychic processes make use of symbols shared by many persons over generations, linking individual unconscious with a larger, collective "unconscious." Half a century later, Jacques Lacan's work constituted a "linguistic turn" in psychoanalysis, providing the notion of a "symbolic order," a linguistically defined collective framework that determines individual psyche.

Some scholars who are now advocating a turn to the "psyche" clearly appreciate Freud and Lacan's insistence that parts of the unconscious cannot be reduced to the social and linguistic. For example, early modern European historian Lyndal Roper argues that while undeniably a historical product of the nineteenth-century, psychoanalysis can help us theorize the transcendental phenomenon of mediation between the discourse of self-understanding and the body, the imaginary and physical and sexual response, linguistic and the material and/or corporeal.[33] This is necessary, she insists, because of the failure of social and linguistic constructivism in explaining the realm between language and subjectivity.[34]

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33 She writes, "It does not endanger the status of the historical to concede that there are aspects of human nature which are enduring.... The hard part...is to specify what precisely is historical about subjectivity" (Roper 1994: 13).

34 Roper writes, "What I want to avoid is a developmental account which turns individuals into mere exemplars of a narrative of collective historical progression... [psychoanalysis] provides a way of accounting for meaningful behavior and individual subjectivity in particular historical circumstances" (Roper 1994: 13). Also see, for example, Margaret Jacob's state of the field article, "Science Studies after Social Construction: the turn toward the Comparative and the Global" written for presentation at the UCLA European History Colloquium, March 1998. She suggests that the "linguistic turn and its focus on representations...contributed to putting gender on the agenda in science studies. In the process, however, purely linguistic strategies also came to associate feminism with epistemological relativism and the turn away from larger questions and research strategies." (Jacob, 1998, 26).

In contrast, scholars like Scott, adhere to a more post-structuralist interpretation of the psyche and psychoanalysis. Scott's complaint about gender is that it is now all too frequently conflated with naturalist assumptions of woman. Not surprisingly, her notion of fantasy does not simply reflect an essentialized unconscious, but is rather shaped through language and culture. She writes, "From a psychoanalytic perspective, the psychological, the social, and the physical don't exist independently of one another; they are instead inextricably combined, constituted in and by psychic processes that are crucially informed by the unconscious" (Scott 1998: 7). Scott thus believes that psychoanalytic thought and post-structuralist thought are compatible because for Lacan and even Freud, sexual identity was never stable but "secured only through its repeated performance." Moreover, Scott appreciates Freud because he links individual psyche with that of the collective. "To the extent that fantasy shapes representations, actions and memories, it becomes a crucial component of human behavior. To the extent that it offers general explanations for the origin of human subjects and their defining characteristics of sexuality and sexual difference, fantasy is not just a component of the psychic life of individuals. It partakes of the mythic structure of Western culture." (Scott 1998: 7). In short, Scott suggests that psychic processes will not only enable scholars to understand the internalization of larger collective experiences of language and culture on the part of the individual, but also grasp how larger, collective fantasies and dispositions themselves are shaped.

Given the continued resistance to and suspicion of post-structuralism, one could well wonder whether China historians are anywhere near a rethinking of gender and querying about the "psyche." At first glance, these theoretical reflections seem fairly distant from concerns of China historians. To begin with, thoughts on the unconscious in the European history field are still in a period of initial gestation. Moreover, Freudian theory is so clearly a product of the unique intellectual milieu in nineteenth-century Europe that it becomes

difficult to apply the concept to Chinese history. Is it appropriate to import a Western concept of the psyche into a non-Western field? Yet the question of embodiment and the concerns behind recent ruminations on the unconscious are not necessarily foreign to Western historians of gender in China. Indeed, the question of how discourses of female subjectivity, sexuality and the body were internalized to the point of becoming uniquely realistic has arisen at least implicitly in recent works on China.

Take for example, Francesca Bray's recent book, *Technology and Gender*. In this ambitious anthropological as well as historical study, Bray articulates the idea of "gynotechnics," the everyday technologies that served to define womanhood from 1000 to 1800 AD. She identifies the technologies of space (e.g., the spatial organization of late imperial households), production (e.g., textile production) and reproduction in order to understand how values and norms about gender were invested with power and made true for late imperial women. Thus, methodologically, Bray moves beyond a rhetorical analysis of discourse and representation without sacrificing the important theoretical insights of the linguistic turn. Indeed, keeping in mind that material life was not *a priori* meaningful, she treats material culture and practices of everyday life as if they were texts. In this manner, she seeks to understand how meaning and values about gender were embedded in these practices and in turn, how they ordered the daily lives of late imperial women and made such ideas literally material and therefore real.

While Bray has not theorized about human subjectivity explicitly, there are developments in the China field heading in that direction. Angela Zito's study of the Qing court's important ritual, the Grand Sacrifice, for example, provocatively argues that subjectivity in eighteenth-century China was conceived of as a *process* of cultivation as opposed to the essential, ontological Self in modern Western thought. Zito posits that it was through *li*, or more specifically, through revered literati or *wen* practices such as the reading and

writing of proper Confucian texts and the practice of proper calligraphy as well as bodily performances of proper ritual conduct, that discourses of the self became internalized.[35] While Zito primarily focuses on male literati practices of ritual, she does mention that footbinding was a bodily practice of *wen* for women. Dorothy Ko's current project, parts of which have been presented in recent publications and conference papers, pursues this topic further. In addition to identifying male discourses on footbinding, she argues from the perspective of *li,* the bound feet was a means for women to demarcate themselves socially vis-à-vis other women, beautify and adorn their bodies, or express their Han civility (*wen*).[36]

In other words, the notion of ritual or *li* is being treated as a means to understand how subjectivity was historically formed in imperial China. Variously translated as ritual, rules of decorum and propriety, *li* has long been conceived of as the means to mediate the internalization of socially sanctioned ethics and rules of decorum in Chinese history. Confucius identified ritual as the central means for the gentleman or *junzi* to cultivate himself and Xunzi argued that *li* allowed one to channel potentially disruptive desires into proper ways of expression. Thus, like the Europeanists' concept of "psyche," *li* can potentially help us theorize from the framework of Chinese thought the process of embodying historically-specific values and discourses.

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35 See Zito, 1997. Also see Hevia, 1997 on *li.* Taking structural-functional interpretations of ritual to task, Hevia argues that ritual itself mediated diplomatic power relations between two imperial civilization with their own universalizing notions of diplomacy, world order, and metaphysics. He uses the Qing guest ritual exhibited during the Macartney embassy as his historical case study.

36 Having conducted initial forays on the topic in her 1994 book, Ko's recent work cautions against seeing the act as one of self-mutilation or as an indication of gender inequality (Ko, 1997).

Conclusion

It is not clear whether China historians of gender will choose to address the more recent theoretical questions of the "psyche" and if so, whether they do so by using the Western concept or by working from the framework of Chinese thought. What is clear, however, is that gender historians have been among those more willing to conduct a dialogue with on-going theoretical inquiries. Even when conclusions drawn from new quixotic theories appear unsettling, unappealing or simply improbable from a practicing historian's perspective, they have taken the time to understand how the theories might benefit their scholarship. This attitude of openness has not only made the move to gender highly productive but also, I argue, has helped make the writing of history in general more responsible. Lastly, their critical engagement with theory will hopefully better enable China scholars to turn around and bear light on larger theoretical discussions.

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